BLOOD IS JADED

Sand is everywhere, in Shurima. A fallen empire is under all of that, its precious Sun Disc having dried away the waters, the ocean, leaving rubble and an expanse of loneliness to its people. Perfect for someone like Talon to wander, think, regroup. After another failure, that is the best course of action to take.

Days ago, he'd been in Urzeris, attempting to find traces of... mother, or anything that Father had left behind. Urzeris belonged to a time when Talon wasn't yet a part of the family. Until now, at least, he was never considered family. Except for...

Frowning, he tugs slightly at the Dormun he'd stolen way back in Kalamanda, from when he first arrived. The port there was lively, much different from The Great Sai, where it seemed like there was nowhere to go, the blazing sun scalding and the sands infinite. Nothing else was left in Urzeris, much like nothing else was left of the Ascended, of the Shurima of old. So Talon kept on, for what else could he do?

Perhaps, if he could reach Bel'zhun, he could tail back to Noxus, and hide for a while until he could find *her* again. And make use of her namesake in the form of a blade, still hidden in his small arsenal. Which has grown smaller, since traveling with heavy weapons or clothes was a sure way to ask for death in this hellhole. Talon still resents getting rid of his cloak for robes that would protect him against sandstorms, clothing that doesn't irritate his skin, that hides his face easily. At least, people here don't ask you why your face is covered, for there is a sound reason to do so, given the nature of this place.

He had a plan. A plan that started and ended in Urzeris. Empty-handed for the third time since becoming a *du Couteau,* he marches on despite it all.

Nothing will stop him from proving his worth, from upholding Father's legacy, from—

Except, Zuretta stops him altogether. You see, the city had a war, which seems to have been millennia ago, and no one had stopped to inhabit it again. What would be the purpose, with a place so ravaged by war as it was? And so, it became a trap for whoever passed by, which happened to be Talon, this time.

His Dormun stepped on false sand, an opening to a tomb, and they both fell down that hole. It was too high up, and as much as Talon desperately tried to clutch to the beast's body, it was no use, for he ended up losing his grip. As they hit the ground, he fell badly on his side. As much as his luck goes, however, he didn't end up falling all the way down, with the Dormun easing his way to the bottom. Still, he can feel the lightning-like sting in his arm where he fell on it, and his breathing grows heavier, as there is some pressure in his lungs — his ribs have probably caved in, piercing the fragile organ inside.

Talon looks to the Dormun's direction, a few feet away from him, emitting a pitiful sound for one last time before going silent. He tries his hardest not to breathe too hard, or to allow his body to cough, even with the dire need to do so, but his mind spirals in a frenzy. In the end, he can't help it, ending up scoffing at the ridiculous situation he is in, and it irritates his throat and lungs, to the point he ends up spitting a trickle of blood on the floor. Which is not good, but oh.

In the past, Talon always thought that he would die by another assassin's blade, one more skilled, faster, swifter; or by *her* hands, once she chose to exact her vengeance and take him out. Maybe a mistake of his, and he would be punished with death, or a fight he picked gone wrong. By all means, in his mind, his death would be brutal, surrounded by the violence he would often hide himself in.

No. It seems like fate is a tricky thing, and he will end up dying, pathetically, in a tomb far away from Noxus. With sand still dripping down the huge hole above, and the night sky deciding to appear. At least it will make for a pretty view, and he won't bother struggling, as there is no one else traveling through here, anyway.

The assassin curls into himself slightly, everything hurting, vision spinning, when he hears a faint noise. Thinking it's the Dormun still fighting for its life, he doesn't bother looking up, until the cavern seems to get... oddly brighter.

Talon looks up, and to his horror, he sees a golden gazelle standing to the Dormun's side. It is massive, not the size a normal gazelle should be, yet it touches its tusk to the Dormun's fur gently. He thinks he's probably hallucinating the whole thing, as he's heard time and time again from soldiers how their fallen comrades would talk about nonsensical magical things they were seeing seconds before death. Talon never

believed it, and he is definitely not going to start to, but the gazelle turns its gaze on him.

Freezing as its too intelligent eyes stare, he's at a loss to what to do. Not even the pain can bring him back out of his stupor, what does is the echoing voice that calls to him.

You are far from home, little lamb.

Talon frowns. Is that… the gazelle talking to him? He fights the urge to scoff again at the absurdity, death must be too close to him now, especially when he finds the voice comforting, soothing.

"I'm—not a lamb," he rasps out, voice weak both from disuse and from his injuries.

The gazelle stalks closer.

No. Lamb, unlikely for you. You are… a dragon. A nestling gone from his nest too soon. Your home is far from here, little dragon.

Talon blinks, sluggish. What is that thing going on about now?

Mocking laughter echoes through the walls, and Talon flinches. They sound like *hyenas.*

In peace, will you go? Or will your limbs work, and will you find strength to fight?

Talon clenches his fist weakly, of course he wants to fight. There is no strength left in him to do so, however, and no one to come to his aid, anyway. So what choice does he truly have here?

More sand falls from the gap, and there is a pattern akin to steps from the ground above. Talon's traitorous heart seizes up and beats faster, adrenaline attempting to keep him alive for just a little longer. However, his eyes fall to the gazelle, and to the multiple menacing eyes in the shadows, hiding, watching him.

The gazelle tilts its head to the side, as if considering.

Your time hasn't come, yet, it appears. Maybe next time we see you, you will be in the First Lands as in the dawn of your existence, nestling, from where you never should have left.

Vision swimming, Talon tries as hard as he can to keep conscious, but the gazelle is fading, and he wants to understand what it's talking about.

Farewell, little dragon. And always remember…

It touches its muzzle against his cheek, a gesture nowhere close to comforting from how *cold* it feels, making the pain in his body all the more real.

Tomorrow is a hope. Never a promise.

As the gazelle finally fades, with the hyenas in tow, silence resides for the briefest of moments before a commotion is faintly heard. People shouting, walking fast, making too many sounds for Talon's tired brain to focus on. He closes his eyes, allowing his body to go completely limp, but making sure to breathe. Keep breathing.

Once a hand touches him, his survival instincts feebly try to surge up. But he is so, so tired, and the sweet, painless idea of unconsciousness quickly comes like a tidal wave, pulling him under.

Talon's consciousness comes back to him in bits and pieces, mind still in the fog, wanting to go back and get lost in it. But he pushes forward, toward the waking world, as there is still much for him to do. First, he takes notice of the pain, especially in his chest, then as his eyes open slowly, the warm brightness of a tent welcomes him. Talon frowns slightly, and even this brings him a headache, when he notices the ceiling made out of sand-silk, instead of the hole from the tomb with the night sky.

Someone's hand reaches out for his forehead, and he flinches. The minimal motion alone brings a tightness to his chest that spreads, a pang of hurt that falls especially on his ribs, and he can barely breathe. The second time the hand tries, Talon does nothing, trying to control the way the air flows into his lungs, making it slower, so it won't enhance the pain. There is a pressure on his forehead, the texture of a wet towel, to wipe away his sweat. He looks in the direction of the person, finding a young girl,

with skin tanned from the sun, hair the color of new earth. She has soft features, as she takes care of him, and Talon becomes more wary of that.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” she says, voice bright. Every nerve in his body screams for him to react, somehow, to put a blade to her throat and escape. But his body is so tired. “I am Taliyah of the Nasaaj. I found you, with the other nomads, on a collapsed tomb in Zuretta. Do you remember that?”

Talon swallows what seems like dry sand from his throat, pins and needles making the thick saliva go down as if it’s piercing his insides. He nods, instead, but still tries again, for there are questions he needs to get the answers of. “I…” his voice sounds not like his own. Sore, fragile, *weak*. He pushes on. “How long have I been…?” the sentence isn’t finished, as a need to cough surges up. Talon knows it will hurt so much more if he does so, instead tamping it down through sheer will, taking slow breaths.

Taliyah, by his side, moves the towel away. “Three days. A priest of the Great Weaver tended to you, nursing you back to health. She has said that you were supposed to…” her lips purse, and her kind expression falls, now somber. The young girl moves about, fetching a water canteen, then bringing it closer to Talon’s lips. From the moment the water touches the dryness of his mouth, he doesn’t dwell on the possibility of poison — the thirst is too great. She helps him drink it slowly, as she keeps talking. “You broke into a fever on the first night, saying all manner of peculiar things. The priest mentioned you had an encounter with Death, and that it helped weave your path to your true destiny.”

He raises a skeptical eyebrow at that. When she draws the now empty canteen away, Talon feels slightly better, so he goes for sitting down. Taliyah gasps in exasperation, but he moves with purpose, so she ends up helping him get comfortable. Now, he looks at the surroundings, the tent he is in filled with nothing but bags made for travel. A lamp is above their heads, hanging without light, and even from inside, it’s possible to feel the sweltering heat from outside. So it’s daytime, then.

“Have you seen the gazelle?” Talon questions, voice still raw, but manageable now that he drank his fill of water.

The girl looks at him like he’s strange. “No, only the dead Dormun.”

Frustration overtakes him momentarily, until he remembers his Father's words on the danger of showcasing his emotions. How you have to hide all of your vulnerabilities, never allow your opponent to guess your next move, never get attached. Attachment, especially, is a weakness. Taliyah stares at him, eyes curious, innocent. Too innocent. Talon considers if he should give information to her, but to ask more, he has to give something away. She looks…

A foreign memory of childhood comes, unbidden. Of red hair and a big smile, directed at him, as hands grab him to play, calling him *brother*.

Talon closes his eyes with force, until all he sees is white dots in the dark.

A decision comes swiftly, so he opens his mouth again to ask her, "is that priest, the one who took care of me, still around?"

Taliyah nods, a soft smile in her lips. "Do you want to speak with her about your health?" he assents. "Alright."

With that, she leaves to fetch the priest. The moment of finally being alone settles into Talon's core, and he sighs, all muscles relaxing in an instant from sheer relief, as he doesn't need to keep them locked. Just so he won't end up attacking the young woman out of nowhere. His hand immediately starts to feel around his chest, poking slightly, and he hisses in pain when a sting like lightning goes through his entire torso. Carefully, Talon takes notice of what he is dressed in — clothes made for the nomads to live in the sands, loose yet full of fabric to protect against the heat and the sun —, beneath a bandage tightly wrapped around his chest. From the corner of the tent, he localizes a familiar bag, one he was using to travel, and it seems to be unperturbed, like no one tampered with it.

The need to check, however, surges up, and with caution, Talon stands up, every step worse than the one before it, but he endures. Slowly, he makes his way to the bag, kneeling beside it, holding his breath to ebb the pain away. He's fast to make stock of the things he had, noticing that yes, nothing is out of place. All the weapons he still has are still in there, with the few clothes and food. Sticking his hand to the very bottom of the bag, Talon feels against a piece of cloth, one familiar, and twists it until the dagger is loose, feels it in his fingers, the *name* it has echoing in his subconscious.

He lets go of it and the bag when the entrance of the tent flaps open.

A woman walks in, looking straight at him with severe eyes. Her posture is strict, her gaze sharp, but her way of dressing herself denounces that she is what these people call a priest. The slight regal air, with the flow of her clothes, make Talon harden his expression.

“You were supposed to be resting, *boy,*” she huffs as she gets inside, sitting beside the bedding he had been in moments prior. A brief pat against the floor tells him what she wants.

As if it’s such a pain to do so, Talon walks closer, tentatively sitting by her side. Her hands instantly go to him to check on his bandages, but his hand wraps around her wrist harshly. The priest gives him an unimpressed look, but makes no other attempt to touch, so he lets her go.

“How is my condition?” Talon asks instead, because this is more important now.

“Stable. You must be careful, though, your internal organs are still recovering from that fall,” her dark, curious eyes peer at him with such intensity it’s hard to keep eye contact, “you should have died, boy.”

Talon scoffs. “An encounter with Death,” he claims sarcastically.

The priest doesn’t find it funny in the slightest, frowning. “Death itself visited you, and helped the Great Weaver set your path elsewhere. To the First Lands. Rare are the occasions in which both work together, and yet…”

That again. *First Lands.*

“That was just a hallucination,” he mumbles, “so I am good to go?”

The priest shakes her head. “That was no hallucination, boy. I have heard you during your sleep, and have checked for myself. The sands spoke to me, and the winds carried a message from somewhere else. That you should go back home.”

To Noxus? Talon frowns. “I don’t see how that is relevant.”

“You are in good shape to go,” she sighs, understanding his meaning. “But I advise you to not diverge from your path again. You must abide by where you should go next.”

“*Where?*”

“Ionia.”

The urge to *laugh* at the absurdity of a simple word overtakes Talon, but he tampers it down, and scowls instead. What kind of joke is that? Even so, the priest looks serious, and doesn’t seem the type to jest, at all. He merely stands up, not saying another word, pace still slower than what he is used to, but being careful of himself so he won’t damage his organs even more. He takes the bag, turning to the priest still patiently on the bedding.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” is everything he says, curtly, not wishing to comment on whatever else she has told him.

“I hope you travel safely, boy.”

Without acknowledging the warmth in her tone, Talon simply leaves the tent, intent on ignoring everything that transpired here and to keep with his quest. But… then again, what else can he do, when he had found *nothing* back in Urzeris? When he knows that there is nothing for him to do in Noxus? That place is now a wasteland of memories — of somewhere that used to mean home, and now…

And yet, he wants to go to her.

“Leaving already?” Taliyah approaches him, forcing the train of thought to stop.

Talon shrugs. “There is nothing for me to do here.”

“So, you’re going home?” she asks, smiling bright. He wonders how can she stomach to be this nice to a stranger like him, someone potentially dangerous — *actually* dangerous, as much as she doesn’t know —, so close to her people.

“I’m not sure,” is all he says.

She seems to contemplate him for a bit, tilting her head this way and that. The way she behaves keeps making Talon’s mind pick random memories that he is quick to tamper down, for they are not worth reminiscing, from a time long gone. A time that should never have been.

“If you have a set destination, you must allow the winds to carry you there, as it’s your destiny. But if your heart tells you to go elsewhere, then you must have unfinished business, and it’s best to handle that before going on a new journey.” Taliyah fetches a piece of paper from inside her robes, then gives it to Talon. Carefully, he picks it, only to see a letter with a map of the route of a ship. “They’re going to dock in Noxus, before sailing for Ionia. Or at least… the part of Ionia controlled by Noxus,” her tone is… indifferent, but if Talon pays close attention, there is contempt veiled underneath. “I don’t know you, or what your business is, but… I trust the Great Weaver’s judgment. So I’m willing to help with this, which is the best I can do for you.”

He has no words for that. No way of discerning how exactly he feels about it, either. In Noxus, showing kindness like this is a death sentence. Ever since he set foot in this camp, these people have done no harm to him, on the contrary, they healed his wounds, asked for nothing in return, and kept helping him despite Talon being an outsider. Taliyah looks at him with eyes of new earth, full of warmth, like she expects nothing out of him. It’s overwhelming. And nothing like how Father treated him.

“Thanks,” is all he can muster to mumble, not used to even saying that word. But it seems to be enough to Taliyah, who beams at him.

“I hope you have a safe travel, Mr. Stranger. May the Great Weaver weave our paths back together again, someday.”

Talon doesn’t say anything, this time, only curving his head slightly in a goodbye. As he walks away, Taliyah waves her hand at him. There is no need for him to voice aloud that he, too, hopes to meet her again, if they ever get the chance.

The voyage is uneventful as it is. Talon manages to infiltrate the ship, and hide himself among their staff easily, having done this other times before. The only moment he allows himself out of his hiding place is during the night, when he will hunt down food to eat and water to drink, at the same time nursing the rest of his sore ribs. They felt

much better, it was just that some movements would still sting and pull at the muscles, so Talon had to take deep breaths, ebb the pain away.

At first, he thought the entire trip he would be plagued by the ghost of his failures — of Father, of *her* —, however, the only thing that seemed to stick to his mind was the curious encounter with the gazelle back in Zuretta. Its words would ring inside him, like a calling, then as he thought back to that priest that healed him, how she urged him to go back to Ionia, it felt even more compelling to give in. But Taliyah was right. Talon has unfinished business in Noxus, so he *needs* to go there first.

Which didn't pose a problem, at all, as Noxus hasn't changed in the slightest. Talon only makes sure to learn when the ship will sail back to Ionia, in case he changes his mind about staying here. In case… well, nothing goes according to plan, and he has to run away *again*, like a coward. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, but at least, now, there is something more solid for him. Some semblance of a plan.

And onto the old du Couteau household he goes. The coming back of the prodigal. *Not really,* that would have been her, not him.

Another infiltration, occurring during the night, where he can hide better — but just like he knows the streets of Noxus, he knows all the passages and secrets of this derelict of a home that he used to think of as his to come back to, one day. Not anymore.

Talon takes the safe way towards where his old room used to be, wanting to *see* for himself what was made of it. If it's still there, intact, no one daring to approach and leaving it to time to wither it away, or if there were orders to change everything, make it useful for something else. Repurpose. Forget.

But when he comes in through the window, using his old trick of opening it even as it's locked from inside, the room looks… the same as when he left. Which has been a long time already. Still, at the same time it seems like it hasn't been touched — there wasn't much in the room to touch, after all, Talon had never been materialistic. Nor hopeful of staying forever, for that matter —, it looks clean, like people have been coming here to do so. His fingers touch the frame of the bed, not a single speck of dust coming off. Talon doesn't know how to feel about this.

His legs automatically drag him through the space, to the small desk in the corner, where he would write letters to Father, mostly, and at times to report to authorities, or to warn her of something. But there is a small change, something that wasn't at the table when he left, that now resides in it like a stark contrast of this empty room.

A cupcake, with a single candle on it, waiting to be lightened. And a piece of paper by its side, with a very familiar handwriting scrawled across it.

Instantly, Talon turns around, expecting a shadow of *her* materializing behind him, whole body tensing in a fighting instance. There is no one, though. No one but the stagnant air, signaling no one's been here for a while now, until Talon himself got in.

Maybe this was, truly, the worst idea he's ever had in his life, and maybe he should go back to the window, never look back. Instead, he shakes the thought off. Being here, after all that happened, is one step further. Now, to see this through to the end is the goal.

Talon goes back to the desk, picking the piece of paper, heart beating in his ears as he starts to discern that awful handwriting and what it says.

Happy birthday, brother.

I know that technically, today isn't truly the day of your birth, but the day father brought you to us. To me, it's still a day worth remembering and celebrating.

We all know both of us are not the sentimental type, and maybe I'm only writing this because I know you'll never see. I have given up hope of ever meeting you again, honestly, at some point I have even stopped thinking about revenge. Your betrayal stings less when I think that you may not be safe, or worse... I don't like to think about these things, at all.

So I hope, wherever you are, that you are alive. That you are well. And that, somehow, you have ridden yourself of the shackles of this family. Our blood is jaded. Rotted. And it's when I come to this conclusion that I'm suddenly glad you're not my brother of blood. You're not rooted to this mess, so you have a chance to be free. I hope, sincerely, that you take this change, and... live. However you wish to live.

I'm not going to say I miss you. But... maybe I do.

From your sister,

Katarina.

Something awful constricts in his chest, clogging his throat, attempting to overflow and spill. Talon can't let it go, so he chokes on it, *drowns,* paper crumpling in his palm as he crushes it in an attempt to get his breathing back to normal. Coming here was, after all, a mistake.

Yet, her words ring true to him. The du Couteau blood is jaded. *Rotted.* For the first time, Talon can admit to himself that he is also glad it's not his blood. He unrolls the paper as best as he can, rereading it once more, finding back his footing. Another purpose. Not that he would ever need her to tell him to do anything, it's just that... admitting that her blessing does mean something to him is harder than expected. And doing so doesn't change a thing, there is still so much to let go of, for even now, *Father's* voice is faint in the back of his head, chanting for action.

Talon pointedly ignores it, opening the bag he's brought with himself, carefully folding the letter and putting it inside. To keep safe.

And then he's rummaging to the bottom, fingers grasping a familiar blade. He takes it out, staring at the way it's now dull, his reflection blurred in it. Her *blood* is still in it. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Twisting it in his grasp for one last time, he puts it on the desk. Bows close to the cupcake, blowing on the candle without light, just for pretending. He won't eat it, no, the paranoia of it being poisoned still haunts his very bones. One step at a time.

Dawn approaches. Talon has to leave. He walks back to the window, looking back one last time, the blade glinting at him as if it's mocking his cowardice.

Talon doesn't take the bait. His journey lies elsewhere, now, and that's where he is headed, choosing for himself for the first time.

And so, he leaves *Katarina* behind.